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Viewing cable 06PARIS2772, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY MINISTER DESCRIBES CHALLENGES

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06PARIS2772	2006-04-27 10:52	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Paris

Appears in these articles:

http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/documents-wikileaks/article/2011/02/09/wikileaks-les-visiteurs-de-l-ambassade_1477418_1446239.htm

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INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PARIS 002772

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/26/2016

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SUBJECT: EQUAL OPPORTUNITY MINISTER DESCRIBES CHALLENGES
FOR FRANCE'S MINORITIES (C-DI6-00627)

Classified By: DCM Karl Hofmann for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Junior Minister for Promotion of Equal Opportunities Azouz Begag provided the Ambassador April 19 with a candid assessment of the current situation of

minorities in France. Begag blamed discrimination for unemployment levels as high as 40 and 50 percent in many of the ghetto-like suburbs ringing France's major cities. Despite his largely pessimistic appraisal of the present situation and the failure of the French integration model, Begag noted several new programs that were working to combat stereotypes and fight discrimination, and looked forward to a more promising future for France's minority populations. Additionally, he cautioned against viewing France's diverse Muslim-descent populations as one homogeneous community, and described himself as a non-practicing Muslim. Begag stated unequivocally that his own academic experiences in the United States had a profound and positive influence on him. He implored the USG to increase exchanges with the youth of France's suburbs and asked the Embassy to encourage American companies doing business in France to lead by example in employment diversity efforts. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Azouz Begag met April 19 with the Ambassador, DCM, PolMinCouns, PolOffs, and ACAO. Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin named Begag the first Junior Minister (Ministre delegue) for Promotion of Equal Opportunity in June 2005, as part of his new government. Begag, born in the suburbs of Lyon to Algerian immigrant parents, holds a Ph.D. in economics and has published over 20 fiction and non-fiction books. Prior to joining Villepin's government, Begag worked on socio-economic urban issues at the government-sponsored National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and served as a member of the influential Economic and Social Council, a joint public-private advisory board, from 2004-2005. Begag taught as a visiting professor at Cornell University in 1988 and at Philadelphia's Swarthmore College in 1998.

First of Three Cycles: 1945-1975

13. (C) Begag explained France's evolving relationship with its minorities in terms of three thirty-year cycles. The first cycle lasted from 1945 until 1975, during which many immigrants were brought to France, primarily from North Africa, to rebuild the country after the Second World War. It was expected that these workers would return to their country of origin after their work was complete -- "the myth of return." They were treated as temporary residents and housed in transit camps and shanty towns, one which was Begag's birthplace. Despite this, however, the first generation of North African immigrants had jobs, which conveyed social legitimacy and gave them the possibility of anticipating a more positive future.

Second Cycle: 1975-2005

14. (C) The second cycle began in 1975 with the global economic crisis and ended in the fall of 2005 with the unrest in the suburbs. During this cycle, native French began to associate Arab immigrants and their children with OPEC and the high oil prices that were blamed for the economic downturn. The first clashes between immigrants and authorities began during this time, and this cycle saw the rise of groups such as the far-right National Front (FN). Begag described the surreal situation that sometimes occurred in the early 1980s, when the children of immigrants were not given French citizenship despite the fact that they were born on French soil and their parents, born while Algeria was still part of France, were themselves French citizens. If arrested, these individuals would often be deported to Algeria and had to petition for re-integration to the only country they had ever known.

15. (C) It was this type of double-standard that prompted the 1983 "March of the Beurs" (beur the term used for the children of North African immigrants), which was fashioned to be France's "March on Washington." Begag expressed disappointment that little had been accomplished in the fight for equal opportunity in France since the landmark march. The Socialist Party leadership in power at the time had promised a parliament of "blond, black, and beur" to accurately reflect the country's shifting demographics. However, this had not come to pass. Instead, many immigrants

and their children became increasingly marginalized. These subsequent generations were left with an identity void, ignorant of the country of their parents' birth but not accepted by France. As a result, many had sought to create an identity based on their cultural and religious origins, resulting in a "Back to Islam" movement that Begag compared to the efforts of Malcolm X. This lack of identity was also one of the root causes in the suburban violence of October

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and November.

¶6. (C) Begag pointed to unemployment, which reaches levels as high as 40 and 50 percent in some suburbs, as another key factor in last fall's unrest. Even highly educated minorities from some of these neighborhoods -- those with three or four years post-high school education -- had difficulties finding jobs. As a result, many of the most gifted youth left the country for the U.S., Canada, or Great Britain. Other youth genuinely desire to make something of themselves, he said, but suffer from poor qualifications -- lack of proper language skills, education, and training -- aggravated by societal fear and discrimination. The government's recent failed CPE (First Job Contract) initiative had been an attempt to "extend a hand" to these underclass youth by attenuating employer fears they would not be able to fire poorly performing employees, thus giving them an incentive to hire candidates they might otherwise shun.

¶7. (C) With some bitterness, Begag observed that the attention lavished on the anti-CPE movement and protesting students had erased from French memory the suburban unrest of last October and November. In contrasting the two crises, Begag stated that those protesting the CPE were not the underclass youth suffering from crushing unemployment, but rather the more privileged students who saw a permanent job as a birthright. Their efforts were well coordinated and enjoyed extensive support from organized labor. Last fall's unrest, however, was not a coordinated effort. There were no leaders, and those responsible were unable to conceive a political solution to their problems. The suburban youth were told "you must respect the law," Begag said, and significant force and state power were used to restore order. The message to them afterwards was, "If you want change, go out and vote." Begag noted with irony that the anti-CPE protesters took to the streets to fight against a law, and ultimately succeeded in overturning it. Begag rhetorically asked how to explain the obvious double standard to the suburban youth.

Third Cycle: 2005-2035?

¶8. (C) Despite the problems of the past, Begag said he believed the next cycle would represent "thirty promising years" for minorities in France. The key factor in this would be employment, and the CPE setback notwithstanding, Begag listed a number of programs the government was undertaking to improve the situation. There was an effort to send the most gifted suburban students to France's best universities, a prerequisite for achieving prosperity and social standing in French society. For those without extensive academic qualifications, Begag judged the new provision allowing students as young as 14 to leave school and begin an apprenticeship as an effective way to teach them a trade. Begag also noted efforts to transform the suburbs themselves -- significant funds to tear down blighted high-rise housing complexes and replace them with smaller, neighborhood style dwellings that would impart a better sense of aesthetics and community.

¶9. (C) As part of his own efforts, Begag touted his ministry's new website (www.diversite-emploi.com), sponsored in part by the country's leading employer's association and Monster.fr, to promote diversity within the workplace. The website has job listings, useful links, and provides information about the legal rights of job candidates as well

as the rights and responsibilities of employers. He also cited the "diversity charter," a pledge signed by many of France's largest companies to "reflect the diversity of French society and in particular its cultural and ethnic diversity in the workforce." One roadblock to his efforts was funding, Begag rued, and he hoped to encourage the government to reprogram some 300 million euros currently budgeted for "integration" of immigrants for his equal opportunity programs; he asked rhetorically why such money was going to foreigners, when it was needed by French citizens. As additional evidence of his optimism, Begag stated his belief that the next government would feature a minority in a high-level cabinet position, and not just one directly linked to an issue of France's minority population, such as his current role. Begag quipped that he would be interested in the Transport Ministry, and has past academic background in this area.

Not A Homogeneous Community

¶10. (C) Begag explained that, in dealing with minorities, even the terminology used to describe them was sensitive, because French Republican values did not recognize ethnic differences. Terms like "Muslim" or "Arab" were taboo, although Begag often used them. However, Begag said, no one

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term was able to completely sum up the variety and diversity of France's minority population. As a result, Begag cautioned against lumping minorities together, particularly those of Muslim origin, saying, "There is no one homogeneous Muslim community." Begag indicated that he himself was not a practicing Muslim. "I don't believe in God, but I think he believes in me," he concluded, adding that he did occasionally fast, which he thought was very beneficial for the mind and body. He did underline that there was a link between the frustration that France's minorities felt at being excluded and violent reactions, stating "If you want to fight terrorism, you must fight discrimination."

Political Scene

¶11. (C) Begag stated that while he was ideologically neither on the right nor the left, he felt that Villepin's government was taking the right approach to fighting discrimination, despite some resistance within the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party. His decision to join the government had angered many on the political left, who felt that defending minorities was "their" cause -- and voting bloc. In fact, he said, center-left daily Le Monde, to which he had previously contributed articles, has refused to print his pieces since he became minister. Begag refrained from gratuitously criticizing Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, with whom he has reportedly clashed on some issues. He judged Sarkozy to be heavy handed at times, such as when choosing his words to describe the youth in the suburbs and in his forthcoming immigration proposal, but more open in other areas, such as his proposal that non-citizens be allowed to vote in municipal elections.

Positive Image of U.S.

¶12. (C) Begag was exceptionally positive about his experiences in the U.S., saying, "I was not the same after Cornell -- it changed me." He indicated that he was accepted without question while there, and he admired that a person could have multiple, complex identities, at one point musing whether France should adopt terms such as "Franco-Arab" or "Franco-African." Begag noted that one benefit to living as an expatriate in another country -- particularly the U.S. -- was that it made a person more attached to his/her own national heritage. As a result, Begag felt that minority French youth could greatly benefit from visiting the U.S., and he strongly encouraged the Ambassador to do all he could to make such exchanges possible. Noting U.S. leadership in workforce diversification, Begag asked the Ambassador to

encourage American companies doing business in France to lead by example in this area. If French companies see how dynamic American firms are as a result of their diversity, perhaps they will increase their efforts, he reasoned.

Comment

¶13. (C) Begag presented himself as a serious individual who has successfully transitioned from academic to political life and has a role to play in France's future. He acknowledged the fact that individuals such as himself were under increased public scrutiny, especially in France where the idea of affirmative action is an anathema to many. He hoped to avoid the controversy surrounding Aissa Dermouche, France's only Muslim prefect in the last several decades, whose 2004 appointment was mired by accusations that he was chosen for his background rather than his qualifications. Begag alluded that the pressure had caused Dermouche to have a nervous breakdown. Although he publicly rejects the idea of affirmative action, Begag seemed at times to struggle to reconcile the Republican-instilled notions of colorblindness espoused by the government in which he serves and the realities of discrimination he obviously knows to be true.

¶14. (SBU) Begag's enthusiasm for and appreciation of the U.S. are very positive indicators, and we will look for ways to use this to our mutual advantage, including seeking his advice on speakers and his possible inclusion in Embassy diversity outreach programs. Already, our Cultural Affairs section has contacted Begag's office to seek his input in nominations for the Benjamin Franklin Transatlantic Fellows Initiative: Summer Institute for Youth, a three-week program designed to send European students (ages 16-24) to the U.S. where they will participate with American youth in leadership, educational, and community service activities. We are similarly evaluating the possibility of organizing a Voluntary Visitor program for members of Begag's ministry to travel to the U.S. End Comment.

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